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The CIA: A Two-Edged Sword That Cuts the U. S.

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The CIA, we are beginning to learn, is a two-edged sword.

It is effective for inflicting wounds (some of them fatal) on enemies of the state—but it is also capable of inflicting deep wounds on us as well.

The problem is that in washing the CIA's dirty linen, we may also wash away some shared assumptions about the way the nation is supposed to work and the ideals it is supposed to stand for. With terrible irony, it will reach a fever pitch in the Bicentennial Year.

The revelations—already leaking with the deadening regularity of a faucet heard in a room at midnight—seem destined to touch departed Presidents. While history demands that we *must* know whether or not they used murder as an instrument of foreign policy, the nation retains an almost child-like need to be reassured about the legitimacy of its history.

If history is rewritten — if Presidents become killers — what will that do to the way we perceive the present?

It is a troubling question, for this nation — more than most others — cannot afford to drift in a moral vacuum. Theodore White, America's premier President-watcher, knifed to the heart of the matter when he wrote that Richard Nixon's "true crime (was that) he destroyed the myth

that somewhere in American life there is at least one man who stands for law" White wrote that in a book titled, with remarkable precision, "Breach of Faith."

If (and it is a big if) the Kennedys — plus Truman and Johnson — are thrown into the historical meat-grinder by the CIA hearings and by the assorted White House and Congressional leaks, it will be almost impossible (as Ford seems intent on doing) to contain the damage: after all, if they did it, why are we to accept the bland statement that the President no longer makes use of this terrible swift CIA sword.

We cannot — not unless we believe that what Presidents say is true, no questions asked. And, infected by all this history, that is a belief we cannot rationally support.

We cannot afford it, in Ford's case, because he does not allow it. In responding to a press conference question about CIA efforts to "destabilize" the Allende government in Chile, Ford said: "I'm not going to pass judgment on whether it's permitted . . . under international law. It's a recognized fact that historically as well as presently such actions are taken in the best interests of the countries involved."

The question is: who decides the "best interests"? And how?

Ford had no answer, except to note that Congress should be kept "fully

informed" in order to be "included in the operations for any such action." The words hint not so much at debate and consensus as at cooption.

Congress has yet to begin grappling with this problem — but its historical dirty linen is also abundantly on display (Lucien Nedzi, chairman of the House CIA "oversight" committee admitted he had been briefed about CIA domestic operations—but did nothing to pass the word along).

What then is to stop an American foreign policy that rests on the whims of the President and Secretary of State alone? Dr. Kissinger himself has publicly called for a broad agreement on foreign policy goals; it's the only effective way he can operate, he says.

But how can such blind, trusting consensus ever act as a guard on the unseen hand of the CIA? The poison spreads; from history into the present, covering our perceptions of the world with an oily film of cynicism. If we cannot believe what the President says, then there can be no ground for realistic debate: it would make more sense to talk to a mirror.

If we have one foreign policy in public, and another in secret, there can be no national commitment to any visible goal. We would run the risk of being just another CIA "front," the biggest "proprietary" of all might turn out to be the United States of America.